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The Rev'd Jeffrey N. Steenson, D.Phil. (Oxon)

PATTERNS OF ORTHODOX WITNESS:
SOME PRINCIPLES FROM THE NICENE FATHERS

I would like for us to look back this morning to the Arian controversy in the Church of the 4th century, that great crisis where at one point the greater part of the official leadership of the Church was embracing a creed which reduced Christ to the greatest of God's creatures. We frequently appeal to the fathers in the crises of our own time in the Church, and there are some fascinating parallels which may indeed help to illuminate the darkness of our own situation today. Some of the points I wish humbly to make in this paper this morning will not, I fear, be welcomed by all of us, but there may be some comfort in the knowledge that orthodox witness in patristic councils was characterized by a good deal of pain. It is frustrating to see the orthodox brethren deeply divided over strategies for maintaining the faith. There is no doubt that the Arian controversy was needlessly prolonged by the lack of unity amongst the orthodox -- although we must not doubt that the Lord of the Church did bring good out of it.

It is important to remember that theological conflict does not necessarily have to result in serious ecclesiastical disruption. For the first stage of the Arian controversy, it appears that ordinary church life simply went on. Most of the Church would scarcely have heard of Arius, and in the quarter century or so after the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), that great watershed of orthodoxy played virtually no part in the consciousness of the Church. Socrates, one of the early ecclesiastical historians, could look back on the early years of the controversy and observe that the eucharistic fellowship of the Church was not significantly disturbed by differences of faith.1

Could a moderate Arianism have found its way into the Church permanently under such tolerance? Possibly. But the peace of the Church was not to endure. What did happen was the recrudesence of a particularly virulent form of Arianism promoted by two of the most odious figures in church history, Aetius and Eunomius. Not content to allow the Church to muddle through under a non-committal leadership, these two radical Arian ideologues demanded that the Church pay attention to their theology. This radical Arianism was characterized by a real "all or nothing" attitude -- highly rationalistic in spirit, it insisted on interpreting the whole of the Christian Gospel in light of its pet principles. The whole framework of Christian thought in the hands of the radical Arians was built around one great

1Ecclesiastical History 2.22.

theological idea -- that God was absolutely unique, and that nothing must be allowed to diminish this utter and splendid solitude. Not Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son of God, not faith nor a measure of humility before the great Mystery of God's inner life ... but a ruthless mathematical precision in the way they asserted that God is One. It is of course well known that this single-mindedness is a prominent feature of most heretical systems. Take one or two good ideas, raise them to an absolute status, insist that all of reality must be ordered around them, and observe: the finitude of the human mind will inevitably spawn an heretical monster, totalitarian in spirit. This is as good a description of the genesis of radical feminism as it is of Arianism, and it is true of many other -isms in our Church today.

The study of Arianism in recent scholarship has yielded some interesting results in the way the heresiarch is now viewed. Articles have been written in defense of Arius; he is promoted as the honest and inquiring theologian with the naive political mind; Athanasius is pictured as the unprincipled broker of ecclesiastical power, who turned to political violence against his opponent once he came to recognize that Arius had the stronger case theologically. Such is the spirit of this age, a cynical spirit so keen to criticize and refashion the received orthodox tradition. Some years ago, that is how my research into the Arian phenomenon began, with the assumption that significant

reconstructions of Arianism were required.2 It is of course never harmful to the cause of Christian Truth to ask the hard questions -- I hope we are all prepared to listen carefully and courteously to theological interpretations foreign to our own -- but if extraordinary measures are taken to allow the old heretics to speak directly to our time, then the need for reconstructions of orthodoxy becomes an obvious requirement as well.

For most of us here, there would be little doubt where the fathers of Nicaea would stand on sharp issues dividing the Church today. They would be alarmed by the overturning of the apostolic tradition of ordaining men only to the sacred ministry. They would be even more concerned with the thinly veiled agenda of the radical feminist theology, to rename God through the use of sexually neutral language. In the end this became the main point at issue with the Arians, whether the names "Father" and "Son" properly identified the persons of the Godhead essentially. The Arians said no, the orthodox said it was the heart of the Gospel. Probably I preach to the converted here. But what may be less well known amongst theological conservatives today is how Nicene orthodoxy came to view the appropriateness and effectiveness of its own witness. There may be some challenging and troubling insights here for the way we make our own witness.

2Basil of Ancyra and the Course of Nicene Orthodoxy (unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1983).

Let us look at what seem to be three fairly distinct patterns of orthodox witness to be found in the Nicene period. We might call call these models the prophetic, the schismatic, and the ecumenical, and look for their expression in Athanasius of Alexandria, the followers of Eustathius of Antioch, and Basil of Caesarea..

1. The witness of Athanasius.

Athanasius contra mundum is a theme close to our hearts.3 God will bless that faithful witness which remains true no matter what the cost, no matter how great the odds. He has taken the foolish things, the weak things, to confound that which the world deems wise and strong. Who a better model than the blessed Athanasius to imitate? He was forced into exile or hiding five different occasions; of the 45 years he was a bishop, perhaps as many as 18 years were spent "on the run." That is the stuff of which legends are made, and when Athanasius died in 373 his stature in the Church had reached truly heroic proportions. Gregory of Nazianzus, commemorating the great saint only a few years after his death, chose for his text the great Christological passage from Hebrews: "seeing that we have a great high priest that is passed into the heavens."4 It is a very long

3Hooker, Ecclesiastical Polity, 5.42.5.

4Oration 21.10.

way from the dark years of mid-century, when the episcopal support for Athanasius (at least in the Eastern Church) was almost non-existent. The mind of the Church "in the present tense" is fickle indeed.

John Henry Newman much appreciated the prophetic power in the life of Athanasius. His sermon in 1832 before the University of Oxford, on "Personal Influence as a Means of Propogating the Truth," spoke of that extraordinary personality "ordained by God's providence to continue the succession of his witnesses."5 Athanasius is not a very good model of the sober reflective detached theologian. Almost all of his writings are to be described by the technical sense of the word "occasional;" Athanasius was provoked to write theology. His exposition of the Nicene faith came somewhat reluctantly, much in that spirit of learning described by C.S. Lewis: "Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered."6

The impact of Athanasius' literary work on the resolution of the Arian controversy is not readily apparent.7 His influence on the Church of his time was supremely as a man of action. Above all else, we see

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5University Sermons, p. 97.

6"Learning in War-Time" in The Weight of Glory (New York, 1949), p. 50.

7In my Basil of Ancyra I have tried to suggest possible influences of Athanasius' writings on the thought of his contemporaries. But the evidence is at best discreet.

Athanasius as a bishop who had the courage to act; his principles are never sacrificed to the economies of personal welfare and survival. He sought to curtail the influences of Arius' supporters in his diocese, continuing a policy belatedly set in motion by Bishop Alexander. The Arians, who so quickly developed an international network of the first order, soon were able to bring powerful forces against Athanasius. It is highly instructive to note the character of the charges preferred against Athanasius: extortion of money to procure linen vestments for his clergy; interruption of Egyptian corn shipments to Constantinople; privy conspiracy against the Emperor; ordering one priest to prevent another priest celebrating the Eucharist, the result being that a chalice was broken and the altar overturned; killing and dismembering a bishop to use his body parts for black magic; prematurely using a church built on imperial property.8 There is a distinct unwillingness to challenge him on theological grounds. Such was (and is) the nature of ecclesiastical controversy -- to take the low road. The bishops at the Synod of Tyre in 336 who would sit in judgement of Athanasius were consumed by such peripheral matters (the charges were groundless), and it would be many years before church synods took up the theological questions per se.

8Athanasius Apologia contra Arianos; Apologia ad Constantium.

It is important that we recognize just how important questions of ecclesiastical jurisdiction were in this period. Perhaps the greatest Athanasian scholar of this century, Eduard Schwartz, established the importance of jurisdiction in the proceedings against Athanasius.9 It is true that Athanasius did not seem overly concerned with canonical technicalities. A few years later returning from his exile in the West, according to the historian Sozomen, Athanasius intervened dramatically in the affairs of churches outside his diocese. He was accused of forcing Arian clergy out of their churches and replacing them with orthodox clergy whom he had ordained -- this happening, as I have said, outside of his diocesan and patriarchal jurisdiction.

The point I make here is simply this -- it is the unique force of his personality and the unshakable strength of his convictions which characterize the kind of orthodox witness made by Athanasius. He was not interested in setting up a rival ecclesiastical system, but insisted on the moral responsibility he had to protect the faithful. In a real sense, the true spirit of Athanasius' ministry was his confidence in the people of God, and his whole energy was directed towards encouraging them. His fearlessness in the face of hostile ecclesiastical and civil powers, his

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9His researches are reflected in an influential account of the condemnation of Athanasius by Hans Lietzmann, A History of the Early Church, 4 vols. (ET, New York, 1950), 3:189-210 passim.

willingness to act boldly for the principles of Christian orthodoxy -- this served to strengthen the hearts of the faithful. Athanasius never doubted that the people stood behind him and that they, not the bishops, constituted the true soul of the Church.(10) That being the case, the moral authority of vested ecclesiastical power could never be simply assumed.11

2. The witness of the Eustathian Church.

The Church of Antioch suffered more than elsewhere because of the Arian controversy. During the quarter century or so after that stalwart Nicene Bishop Eustathius was deposed (shortly after the Council of Nicaea) a sizeable succession of bishops -- more or less Arian in sympathy -- tried to govern that Church. If you want to celebrate pluralism in the Church, look to Antioch. Sozomen provides us with a description of battles on the liturgical front -- the *Gloria Patri* being an occasion when worshippers could voice their own theological sentiments. The orthodox offered praise to the Father and the Son, the proposition indicating co-equality; the Arians praised the Father by the

10See John Henry Newman, The Arians of the Fourth Century, 3rd ed. (London, 1871), p. 454: "The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not."

11Dr Pusey addressed this question of the limits of obedience to bishops. See Dionysius.

Son, the preposition here indicating the inferiority of the Son to the Father.12 Leontius, the bishop at the time, could only point to his full head of white hair and say, "When this snow is dissolved, there will be plenty of mud."

Eustathius was deposed by a powerful coalition of Arian bishops who controlled Asia Minor and Syria, and again charges were brought against the moral character of an orthodox bishop -- a patrimony suit (adultery) and insulting the Emperor's mother (high treason) were mentioned. He was exiled to Thrace, where he died in obscurity.13 The bahavior of Eustathius' followers in Antioch was rather different from those of Athanasius in Alexandria. Early on, the Eustathians chose a separate course and withdrew from communion with the main body of Christians in Antioch. When Athanasius passed through the city in 346 returning from his second exile, he found the Eustathians meeting in a private house. He naturally preferred fellowship with them, and he attempted (unsuccessfully) to negotiate a compromise whereby the Eustathians would be given the use of one of the city churches.14 For many years the Eustathians continued their separated existence under the leadership of the presbyter

12Ecclesiastical History 3. 20 (NPNF).

13The details of his downfall are complex. See R.V. Sellers, Eustathius of Antioch (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 39-59.

14Sozomen Ecclesiastical History 3.20 (NPNF). The Emperor had asked Athanasius if he would be willing to allocate one church to the Arians in Alexandria; he countered with a proposal to endow the Eustathians with a church in Antioch; the Arians refused, and there the matter ended.

Paulinus, regarding themselves as the continuing Nicene presence in Antioch.

In 361 a happy surprise was visited upon the people of Antioch. A new bishop, Meletius, arrived, and it was thought that he would continue the Arian succession in that city. But he stunned everyone once he was installed by teaching Nicene doctrine.[15] A great opportunity presented itself, unifying the orthodox of Antioch under Meletius' leadership. But the Eustathians would hear nothing of it and insisted on maintaining their separation. In 362, two Italian bishops, Eusebius of Vercellae and Lucifer of Calaris, travelled eastward on a mission to advance the cause of the Nicene faith. Eusebius went to Alexandria and with Athanasius succeeded in conducting a council that produced the influential Tomus ad Antiochenos, a splendid resolution of several theological matters which had divided the Nicenes. Lucifer had gone to Antioch, and he promptly ruined the opportunity to unite the orthodox by consecrating Paulinus as bishop. Antioch thus had two orthodox bishops, the more moderate Meletius in the authentic succession, and the ultra-orthodox Paulinus of the schismatic Eustathians. Fifty years would pass before that breech could be healed

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15Sozomen (ibid., 4.28) describes a dramatic scene: Bishop Meletius was preaching and suddenly proclaimed that the Son was homoousios with the Father. The Arian archdeacon reached out to cover Meletius' mouth, but the bishop then raised three fingers, closed his hand, and then raised one, indicating three Persons in one substance. The wretched archdeacon then grabbed at the bishop's hand, only to free his mouth, from which the Nicene faith poured forth once more.

and the Eustathians brought into the fold.16 Old Athanasius backed Paulinus; Meletius had the support of the younger generation of orthodox leadership, most notably St Basil the Great; and an unfortunate and altogether unnecessary new chapter of division amongst the Nicenes was begun.17

Such is this second type of orthodox witness during the Arian controversy, which argues for separation and doctrinal purity. The Eustathians would not accept Meletius nor re-enter the main body of the Church, in part because he was ordained by Arians and because the new generation of churchmen in Antioch had been baptized by Arians.18 There is an inflexibility in the Eustathian character which prevented them from recognizing true allies, a hastiness which led them into ecclesiastical arrangements not easily reversed, a narrowness of vision which saw them becoming increasingly self-absorbed and irrelevent from the perspective of larger movements within the Church. It is true that their circumstances were more difficult than were faced by Athanasius and the Alexandrians. Yet the Eustathian response to the Arian challenge was qualitatively different from the Athanasian. A key to the mood of the Eustathians is provided by the meddlesome Lucifer of

16Socrates Ecclesiastical History 3.5-9. The sad tale is further complicated by a third bishop, the Arian Euzoius, who temporarily held sway under the patronage of the Arian Emperor.

17The story is most fully told in F. Cavallera, Le schisme d'Antioche (Paris, 1905).

18Socrates Ecclesiastical History 2.44.

Calaris, who appealed to the example of the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes as justification for staunch resistence against the Emperor who promotes Arianism. The Athanasian witness was an act of prophecy, the Eustathian more an act of war.

3. The witness of the Cappadocians.

As we have already mentioned, it was the schism in Antioch which probably drew the young Bishop Basil of Caesarea to the attention of the venerable Athanasius. First impressions were not, apparently, entirely favorable (to Athanasius, Basil was tainted by early associations with old enemies). Basil had to labor hard to win the confidence of Athanasius for his peace-making efforts to restore unity to the Nicene communities in Antioch. There is a fascinating correspondence in Basil's letters to this purpose, where he begs Athanasius to use his authority to intervene and bring the intransigent Eustathians into the Meletian camp.19 "We are bound to regard the interests of peace as paramount, and that first of all attention be paid to the Church of Antioch, lest the sound portion of it grow diseased through division on personal grounds."20 Basil's

19Epp. 66, 67, 69, 80, 82. Part of Basil's proposal involves the securing of the Bishop of Rome's support for Meletius.

20Ep. 69.

importunity did pay off in the end, and an accord was reached which recognized Meletius' rightful place.

I have suggested that this Cappadocian witness to orthodoxy might be described as ecumenical. Basil did things for the peace of the Church which were frequently criticized for being too compromising. When controversy broke out over the divinity of the Holy Spirit, Basil would refrain from calling the Spirit God. Privately he held to the full homoousion of the Spirit, but publicly he was unwilling to upset a whole group of churchmen who had only recently given their assent uncertainly to the Nicene formula. Be patient and don't push overmuch, was Basil's counsel, and let Christian truth work quietly on doubting and wayward minds. This approach does not often set well with the most zealous of the orthodox, and Basil did find it painfully difficult to respond to attacks from the right concerning his orthodoxy. His friend Gregory of Nazianzus found the word to describe this prudent leadership style -- *oikonomia*.21 It is about the maintainance of the faith by stages and degrees, sensitive to the difficulties of believing and aware of the special circumstances of the time. It is about flexibility in means to achieve the right end. One should not ruin the whole cause of orthodoxy because of an uncompromising temperament. The doctrine of economy in St Basil is based on the responsibilities and

21Oration 43.68. Athanasius himself belatedly came to appreciate Basil's method (ad Palladium).

possibility of Christian charity: "Not that I think it is absolutely our duty to cut ourselves off from those who do not receive the faith, but rather to have regard to them in accordance with the old law of love, and to write to them with one consent, giving them all exhortation with pity, and to propose to them the faith of the fathers, and invite them to union."22

The Eustathians were very strict about preserving the purity of their communion and clung to their ecclesiastical isolation tenaciously. Basil himself was moved by the strength of ultra-orthodox convictions: "The people have left the houses of prayer and are holding congregations in the wilderness. It is a sad sight. Women, boys, old men, the infirm, remain in the open air, in heavy rain, in the snow, the gales and frost of winter as well as in the summer under the blazing heat of the sun. All this they are suffering because they refuse to have anything to do with the wicked leaven of Arius."23 Athanasius was himself not inclined to be in communion with those who wavered at the fringe of the Nicene faith. Basil, on the other hand, threw himself enthusiastically into relations with the semi-orthodox because he believed in the unifying power and

22Ep. 128.3. On this doctrine of economy see P.J. Fedwick, The Church and the Charisma of Leadership in Basil of Caesarea (Toronto, 1979), pp. 72-76. "...though deeply preoccupied with the purity of the church's faith, Basil, instead of being a hair-splitter and perfectionist, preferred 'to make himself weak with the weak' in order to be of 'no hindrance to those who are being saved' (p. 75).

23Ep. 242.2.

prevenient wisdom of Christian love. His openness may be explained in part by the improving circumstances for Nicene orthodoxy. While Basil often was pessimistic about the state of the Church (Ep 92.2), the tide was clearly turning in favor of Nicaea. So he could afford to be generous with his enemies, where the earlier Athanasius perhaps could not. And yet improving circumstances do not adequately explain Basil's method of accomodation. He would survey the state of orthodox witness in the Church and observe: "The love of many has waxed cold; brotherly concord is destroyed, the very name of unity is ignored, brotherly admonitions are heard no more, nowhere is there Christian pity, nowhere falls the tear of sympathy. Now there is no one to receive 'the weak in faith.'"23 The aloofness and brittleness of many champions of orthodoxy only add to the spiritual malaise of the Church.

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It is probably clear where my sympathies lie. The leadership of men such as St Basil seems to have been crucial for the happy resolution of the Arian crisis and the acceptance of the Nicene Creed as the orthodox standard for belief in the blessed Trinity. Athanasius got the greater measure of glory in subsequent generations -- which is not

23De Spiritu Sancto 78. .

to say that he didn't deserve it -- but it was the steady and patient witness of the Cappadocians and others which had perhaps the greater practical consequences. Although they did not all immediately recognize it, these Nicene fathers very much needed the witness of each other. St Basil would write to the orthodox bishops of the West: "The saddest thing about [the situation in the Churches of the Eastern Empire] is that the sound part is divided against itself ... in addition to the open attack of the heretics, the Churches are reduced to utter helplessness by the war raging among those who are supposed to be orthodox."25 We need to make a similar declaration, acknowledging that we need each other, and that we ought to be linked one with another.

We seem today to be quite mesmerized by formal ecclesiastical structures and alignments, and so for us it is perhaps difficult to appreciate just how important the exercise of personal witness was in the conflicts of patristic Christianity. It is impressive to see in an Athanasius or a Basil the serene confidence of leadership which soared beyond the legalistic pretensions of the Arians. They knew their mind, were assured in their convictions about Christian orthodoxy, it is true. But they also shared a deep belief that the Church of Jesus Christ simply *is* and will continue to *be*. This is a distinguishing feature of patristic ecclesiology, so refreshingly free of our great 20th century heresy -- that for something to be

25Ep. 92.3.

true it must continually be self-validated and self-actualized existentially. The fathers did not expend their energies always trying to create the Church but were content simply to be the Church. This opened up many possibilities for them that are not always available to us by our tendency to accept an overly juridical view of the Church. The character of intercommunion in the patristic period was quite fluid and informal, characterized by a good deal of crossing artificial jurisdictional lines. The historian Socrates described the Cappadocian ministry of encouragement in this way: "Gregory being constituted bishop of Nazianzus ... pursued a course similar to that which Basil took; for he went through the various cities, and strengthened the weak in faith. To Constantinople in particular he made frequent visits, and by his ministrations there comforted and strengthened the orthodox believers."26 The nature of Christian communion thus was not governed by lines drawn on an ecclesiastical map but by personal relationships of friendship and fellowship based upon a common profession of belief.27

26Ecclesiastical History 4.26.

27On the Nicene Creed as the sufficient condition of communion see Basil ep. 125.1.